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Nuisance sea lions, seals subject of federal hearing

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The California sea lion population on the West Coast is expected to top 300,000 this year, up from 80,000 animals in the late 1970s.

The effects of that growing population are being felt on the West Coast from Canada to Mexico, according to those who testified in San Diego yesterday at a congressional subcommittee hearing on the reauthorization of the Marine Mammal Protection Act. It was the first meeting in a process that is expected to take six months to a year to complete.

Melinda Merryweather said the Children's Pool in La Jolla is a stinky mess because hundreds of sea lions and seals hang out on a beach that was dedicated by Ellen Browning Scripps for children and beach-goers. She wondered whether a soccer field would be abandoned for a pack of coyotes.

Buck Everingham of Everingham Bros. Bait Co., a San Diego institution since 1951, said hungry and aggressive sea lions damage his bait receivers and cost him hundreds of thousands of dollars a year for repairs.

"I see this as an ongoing problem that with the present laws will only get worse," Everingham said at the hearing, held at HUBBS-Sea World Research Institute.

The U.S. House of Representative subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans heard testimony from six stakeholders such as Everingham and Merryweather, and four scientists.

Missing in action: the environmental community.

Rep. Richard Pombo, R-Tracy, chairman of the committee, said the Democratic committee members, known for their connections with environmentalists, never submitted any names to testify.

"The minority party chose not to participate," Pombo said.

Outside the meeting, a group of protesters with environmental ties toted signs and such.

"We're most concerned that this is the beginning at weakening the Marine Mammal Protection Act," said protest organizer Pam Dake of the Blue Movement, representing several environmental groups. Seaflow, a group based in Fairfax, Calif., for instance,

fears the military is killing marine mammals such as whales and porpoise with sonic blasts from sonar.

Inside, those testifying painted a bleak picture, showing an increase of conflicts between man and pinnipeds. They also portrayed city, state and federal agencies confused about enforcement, about what is harassment of mammals and what can be done to prevent health and safety problems from nuisance mammals.

Doyle Hanan, a former Department of Fish and Game marine biologist, said the California sea lion population on the West Coast has grown to "well over 300,000."

Hanan said the sea lions eat more than a million tons of fish a year and that they cost the California sportfishing industry more than \$7 million a year in lost gear and catches. That's up from \$450,000 a year in the early 1980s.

Rep. Randy "Duke" Cunningham, R-Escondido, interrupted his Hawaiian vacation to be here. He said a compromise needs to be found between those who want to protect mammals and those who want to use the ocean resource.

Carl Anderson of Monterey said the resident population of sea lions there has risen from 150 animals to between 1,000 and 1,500. The pinnipeds sink boats, attack city workers and "defecate and vomit parasites wherever they go," he said.

"There must be some nonlethal measures put into place to bring the sea lion population under control," he said.

H.R. 2693, introduced by committee member Wayne T. Gilchrest, R-Maryland, requires the government to research nonlethal removal and control of nuisance pinnipeds.

Bob Fletcher, president of the Sportfishing Association of California, also called for nonlethal removal, though one form of it developed by San Diego-based Pulse Power Technologies Inc. failed to gain approval from the California Coastal Commission for at-sea testing, he said.

Robin Brown of the Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife said his department supports giving the state and federal management agencies the authority "to remove rogue pinnipeds."